

Opt Out of the Blame Game

By Gay Smith

DO YOU PLAY THE BLAME GAME WHEN RESPONDING to complaints about flower quality? Who doesn't want out of the hot seat when something goes awry? When it comes to delivering high quality flowers, myriad variables make pinpointing the source of a problem tricky. Some telltale signs can point you in the right direction to the source of some common problems.

Complaint No. 1: Lifeless Lilies

A day or two after receiving a shipment of Oriental lilies from Costa Rica, a bouquet maker in Calgary notices the blooms have cracked open and are pollinating. The flowers look stressed and have no color vibrancy. The bouquet maker blames the bulb propagator for supplying poor quality bulbs.

At issue: Assuming the flowers cleared Miami without fumigation problems and were shipped via truck with proper temperatures, the problem can probably be traced to ethylene exposure and/or moving flowers directly from ambient temperature at harvest into cold storage without allowing flowers to first cool down in stages.

The Solution: For lilies with long and often tough transport, experts recommend STS and bulb hormone treatment at the grower level. They also recommend that bouquet makers fill their buckets with a hormone solution formulated for bulb flowers to help reduce stress response.

Complaint No. 2: Off-Color Orchids

A customer returns a large arrangement of white dendrobium orchids two days after purchasing the flowers for a party. The blooms have turned a strange chartreuse color, and the unopened buds are shriveled. She demands a refund, blaming the florist for selling poor quality product.

At Issue: Dendrobium orchids (as well as cymbidiums, phalaenopsis and cattleya orchids) are sensitive to ethylene. While the florist processed the stems correctly by giving them a fresh cut and re-hydrating the orchids in flower food overnight at 50°F, the grower failed to

pre-treat flowers with STS — the ethylene protector. Then, the customer displayed the arrangement in a room filled with cigarette smoke, an ethylene producer.

The Solution: You can't dictate where customers put their arrangements, but you can ask about display environments and advise accordingly. Also, consider telling customers about common ethylene sources — smoke, combustion exhaust and some fruits and vegetables.

Complaint No. 3: Gerberas with Spots

A florist blames his wholesaler for spotty gerberas. Under inspection, it appears Botrytis spots show up on the petals, and a few heads have rotted directly under the bloom where flowers attach to the stem.

At issue: Botrytis, a ubiquitous airborne fungus, requires four continuous hours of moisture to start germinating. The airborne spores of the fungus are easily dispersed throughout the design area, from a bunch of leather leaf used to brush green bits off the table or spore-laden bristles on a broom.

In this case, a designer asked the delivery person to leave the gerberas in the shop's back room. Since the order had been pulled, packed and stored in the wholesaler's cooler the night before, the flowers were cold. At ambient temperature, cold blooms immediately started to condensate. By the time the flowers were processed, the sleeves were sweaty, and a micro-layer of condensation was visible on the blooms and under the straws. When the flowers were used in design work a day later, spots were starting to develop and were clearly visible 24 hours later. The gerberas buckets also were placed on the floor of the cooler where their heads got dripped on as designers pulled products from shelves overhead.

The Solution: The florist's processing procedures need major work. The coolers should have been put in the cooler until processing. They can be proactive by sanitizing work tables and tools with a floral friendly solution several times a day. Botrytis thrives on both live and dead tissues, so it is important to remove the green bits from cracks and shelves. When scrubbing buckets, dunk brooms in the cleaner solution before dumping it.

The Final Judgment

This is a complicated industry and finger pointing won't always lead you to a solution. Before making assumptions and assigning fault, take a hard look at the nuts and bolts surrounding the issue and ask questions. Once you've clarified the circumstances, change procedures and protocols to avoid a repeat offender. 🌿

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Info To Go

Dehydration Station

Who can't relate to flowers that upon arrival look like they need a good, stiff drink? Who's at fault? Potentially several culprits — get on the case by clicking along the Info to Go logo on www.safnow.org. Or call SAF's Fast Fax, (888) 723-2000 and request document #960.

— G.S.